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Abu Sayyaf gunmen seize 5 villagers in Philippines

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Fleeing Abu Sayyaf gunmen behind a failed plot to take over a southern Philippine city briefly seized five villagers Thursday to guide them away from a massive military manhunt, officials said.

Seven Abu Sayyaf militants freed their captives after they pointed the way out of a rubber plantation in Lamitan township on Basilan island while the militants fled government troops who have pursued them for two days, regional military commander Lt. Gen. Benjamin Dolorfino said.

The militants also seized one villager in Lamitan on Wednesday and used him as a guide before releasing him to continue their escape, he said.

The seven were among dozens of Abu Sayyaf gunmen who set off bombs and then opened fire on civilians and troops after their apparent plan to seize Basilan's provincial capital of Isabela faltered Tuesday when government forces fought back.

At least 14 people were killed in the daring siege, including three marines, a police officer and three militants. One of the slain militants was Abu Sayyaf commander Bensar Indama, the military said, adding that the rest of the dead were civilians who were shot by the militants.

It was one of the most ambitious attacks by the Abu Sayyaf, a small but violent al-Qaida-linked group blacklisted by Washington following two decades of deadly bombings, kidnappings and beheadings. The Abu Sayyaf is suspected of having received training and funds from Osama bin Laden's terrorist network.

Government troops were pursuing another group of militants, believed to be led by another commander, Puruji Indama, in a hinterland in Isabela's outskirts but have so far failed to capture him and his men. Puruji is the brother of Bensar, Dolorfino said.

Dolorfino urged residents to stay indoors and provide information to troops if they see the militants in or near their communities in Basilan, an impoverished, predominantly Muslim island 550 miles (880 kilometers) south of Manila.

"They're confused and desperate and apparently have lost contact with their leader. They don't even know their way," Rear Adm. Alex Pama told The Associated Press.

Authorities have begun interrogating two captured militants to determine the motive

for the attack, which the military believed may have been inspired by an April 1995 Abu Sayyaf attack on the Christian town of Ipil, also in the south.

During the Ipil attack, the militants killed more than 50 people after robbing banks and stores and burning the town center.

During Tuesday's attack, most Isabela commercial banks were brimming with cash, to be used by companies to pay their employees' mid-month salary, Pama said.

Singapore-based terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna said that, despite this week's spectacular attack, the Abu Sayyaf is weak after countless U.S.-backed offensives and could be crushed with a final assault.

"These are the last battles the Abu Sayyaf is fighting," Gunaratna told The AP on the sidelines of an anti-terrorism conference in Manila. "The Philippine government should now pour all the resources it has to destroy this group."

The Abu Sayyaf is the smaller of at least four Muslim groups fighting for decades for a separate homeland in the predominantly Catholic nation's south. It is estimated to have more than 390 fighters and is still considered a major security menace.

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